

Michigan Time Traveler

An educational supplement produced by Lansing Newspapers In Education, Inc. and the Michigan Historical Center

Ovens, Cans and Ice

Even with instant foods, microwave ovens, and refrigerators, planning and preparing family meals is work. This month's Time Traveler explores what it was like to buy, store and prepare food 100 years ago.

Kids' History

Store vs. Supermarket

One hundred years ago families shopped at the local grocery or general store. In a town or city, a housewife could telephone her order to the store or send a child with a list. A teenage boy would usually deliver the food to her home. Farm families would bring in their eggs, butter, and extra produce to trade for items like sugar or coffee that they could not produce themselves.

Self-serve markets began opening around 1910. Instead of handing a shopping list over to the grocer, shoppers walked through the aisles to pick up their own items. Modern supermarkets, with wide aisles, shopping carts and cashier lanes, did not begin appearing until the 1940s.

In 1949 the Abood family's Lansing grocery was a modern self-serve store. (State archives)

Above Right: Refrigerators and gas stoves of the 1930s were smaller than later models.

Right: Students from Waldron School, Fowler, peer into the 1950s gallery at the Michigan Historical Museum that features a popular trend in appliances—color!

Below: The wood-burning stove in the Michigan Historical Museum's Growing Up in Michigan gallery has a special box above the burners, called a warming oven for warming plates or rolls. It was made by the Peninsular Stove Company in Detroit.

What Foods Could Families Buy?

By 1900, all families—rich or poor, city or country—used canned food. Some farm families still canned their own fruits and vegetables. But they also bought “fancy” foods like pineapple and oysters, which were canned far away and shipped to Michigan.

Middle class families ate a wide variety of foods, serving separate meat and vegetable dishes, and often a salad or dessert. Poor families made soups and stews that combined cheap cuts of meat and plentiful vegetables like carrots and onions.

Keeping Food Cold

Have you ever heard someone call a refrigerator an “icebox?” In 1904 many Michigan families had one—a wooden box lined with tin and insulated with straw or hay. A block of ice in the top kept food cold. A drip pan underneath the box caught the melt water. It had to be emptied daily.

In 1904 there was more fresh food available than fifty years earlier. Refrigerated rail cars made produce available for a longer season—but not year round. Ice, cut from ponds in winter or made by artificial refrigeration, cooled butchers' meat lockers.

Practical electric home refrigerators were not mass-produced until the late 1920s. Many families couldn't afford one during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when jobs were hard to find. In the early 1940s, factories were making weapons and equipment for World War II instead of appliances. Once the war ended, people purchased refrigerators eagerly.

By the 1950s, new highways and refrigerated trucks allowed mass distribution of frozen foods like orange juice and frozen vegetables. The growing popularity of television led to the marketing of “TV Dinners,” frozen meals that took only thirty minutes to cook and required no clean up.

Timeline of Food History

- 1893-Electric range shown at World's Fair
- 1897-Condensed soup available in shops
- 1903-Canned tuna on store shelves
- 1906-Kellogg's Company begins selling Corn Flakes
- 1908-Electric toaster invented
- 1911-First home refrigerator installed
- 1930-Mass marketing of frozen foods
- 1937-First supermarkets open
- 1948-First sales of frozen French fries
- 1953-First TV dinner in supermarkets

Things To Do

Find a recipe from an old cookbook. Make a grocery list based on the ingredients. Are they ingredients you can still find today? Make a list of your favorite foods. Do your own research and see if you can find out when these foods became popular. Are they the same foods your grandparents ate when they were children?

At The Michigan Historical Museum

Tour the kitchens in the Growing Up in Michigan, World War II, and 1950s galleries. Visit the Rural Michigan gallery and see the types of foods grown and manufactured in Michigan. The Michigan Historical Museum is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free. Hours: Monday-Friday: 9 a.m.- 4:30 a.m.; Saturday: 10 a.m.-4:00 p.m.; Sunday: 1-5 p.m. Telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. Visit the Michigan Historical Museum's Web site: <http://www.michiganhistory.org>



Lansing Newspapers In Education (NIE) provides Lansing State Journal newspapers and supplemental teaching materials for area classrooms at little or no cost to the schools. The newspaper becomes a “living textbook,” providing students with timely and relevant topics for discussion in class and at home. If you are interested in sponsoring classroom papers or using the newspaper in your classroom, please contact NIE at (517) 377-1242.

